Here is the complete English translation of Karl Löwith's 1936 inaugural lecture at Tohoku Imperial University in Sendai.

The Idea of Europe

in German Philosophy of History

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In the short but rich epoch spanning from Kant to Hegel and from Lessing to Goethe, Germany possessed poets and thinkers of European stature who even today establish its reputation as a classical realm of culture. This epoch ends in 1831 with the death of Hegel, followed a year later by Goethe. Only at this conclusion of classical German philosophy does a specifically German philosophy of history arise—one that grasps the total event of Europe in its spiritual essence and summarizes it under a single principle: the freedom of the spirit. Prior to Hegel's philosophy of history, on which he delivered lectures from 1822 to 1830, we possess no philosophy of history proper. Kant, Fichte, and Schelling had not yet felt the need to justify their own systems out of the historical context; they merely referred to their immediate predecessors, but conceived neither a history of all European philosophy nor a philosophy of history. Herder's *Ideas for the Philosophy of the History of Mankind* (*Entwurf zu einer Geschichte der Menschheit*) indeed contains an abundance of powerful ideas, but they are not grasped systematically or conceptually. By contrast, for Hegel's system of philosophy, the history of philosophy is no mere external addition to its systematic parts; rather, his entire thinking as such is historical.

Even his first work, the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, is a history of the development

of appearing spirit, a representation of the stages of the formation of knowledge in which systematic conceptual steps and historical references to specific epochs cannot be separated. Insofar as Hegel always and everywhere grasps a movement of the spirit, he also presents its development as inherently progressive. This developmental-historical nature of the spirit is clearly articulated by Hegel at the conclusion of his first work. The goal of the exposition—absolute knowledge—can only be reached by way of the "recollection" (*Erinnerung*) of all spirits that have previously existed. This path through that which has already been—history—is not a detour to be avoided, but the only viable path to the completion of knowledge. The "Absolute" or the "Spirit" does not merely possess an external history in the way a human being wears clothes; rather, precisely as a movement of self-development, it is something that only comes into being over the course of time. As a spirit increasingly recollecting and relinquishing itself (*sich entäußernder Geist*), it is historical in its very self, even though the dialectical movement of becoming does not proceed linearly into infinity, but in a circle, so that only at the end is the beginning fulfilled, the origin realized at the goal, and in a word: completed.

Just like the *Phenomenology*, Hegel's *Aesthetics* and *Philosophy of Religion* are simultaneously a history of art and of religion. But the most proper mode of the revelation of the spirit occurs in philosophy, to which, again, belongs a history of philosophical knowledge. And even today, all notable accounts of the philosophy of history—from J. E. Erdmann to K. Fischer—move upon the ground of historical knowledge created by Hegel. Finally, history itself, as world event, is the object of a special philosophy of history meant to show that spirit reigns not only in the movements of nature (e.g., the celestial bodies), but also in the seemingly accidental sequence of the affairs of nations. It shows that this human history is a spirit-filled and therefore meaningful sequence of advances through which spirit is progressively liberated and comes to itself.

The most important steps in this progressive self-liberation in Hegel's philosophy of history are as follows: world events begin in the East with the great ancient Oriental empires of China, India, and Persia; they continue in the Greek and Roman state formations along the Mediterranean; and they end with the Christian-Germanic realms in the Western North. The world-historical movement in Hegel's construction thus moves unambiguously from East to West. "Europe is simply the West and the end of world history," just as Asia is the East and the beginning. The

universal spirit of the world is the sun, which rises in the East only to set in the West. In this movement, through hard struggles, the spirit is educated toward freedom. "The Orient," says Hegel, "knew and knows only that *one* is free; the Greek and Roman world that *some* are free; the Germanic world knows (because it is a Christian one) that *all* are free".

For Hegel, the history of the ancient Orient signifies the "childhood" of world events, while the history of the Greeks and Romans represents youth and manhood. By the Christian-Germanic world, he understands the definitive conclusion of the two preceding worlds. The freedom belonging to the Christian world is no longer the caprice of an individual despot, nor the freedom of Greeks and Romans contingent upon slaves, but the freedom (understood in the Lutheran sense) of every Christian human being. What Europe is according to its idea thus has its origin in Greco-Roman antiquity and in Catholic-Protestant Christianity—in ancient myth and in Christian dogma. These two epochs must now be characterized more closely.

According to Hegel, the peculiar nature of the Greek world consists in the fact that here spirit liberates itself individually for the first time; its "substance" becomes "subject". In Greece, prominent individuals bring forth a multifaceted wealth of individual figures, whereas in the ancient Orient the spiritual substance remains massive and uniform. "With the Greeks," Hegel says, "we feel at home at once," because here we are on the ground of the spirit that makes everything foreign its own. Greek life is a true "deed of youth"; Achilles, the poetic youth, opened it, and Alexander, the actual youth, concluded it. In both appears the most beautiful and free individuality, and both develop it in combat against Asia. Greece is politically and spiritually an anti-Asiatic power and as such the beginning of Europe, whose spiritual wealth consists of individual forms.

This spiritual multifacetedness also characterizes the nature of the Greek landscape, scattered across many islands in the sea rather than forming a solid landmass. Hegel remarks that we do not find here the "oriental physical power, not a river like the Ganges, the Indus, the Euphrates, Tigris, etc., through which human beings would be bound in a uniform manner, but throughout that dispersion and diversity which perfectly correspond to the manifold nature of the Greek tribes and the mobility of the Greek spirit". Yet this spirit-filled land of individual figures succumbed, owing

to its lack of unity, to the political power of Rome. Rome was the first to create a state existing for itself—a political universality—and opposite it, the private, legally entitled personality. With its uniformly organizing power, the Roman Empire laid the foundation for the future Europe and politically and culturally permeated the entire world of that era. Hellenic culture traveled everywhere along Roman roads, without which Christianity could not have expanded into a world religion.

The inner limitation of both the Greek and Roman worlds, however, consists in the fact that ancient spirit still faced a blind fate outside itself. Ultimate decisions—and thus the freedom of the spirit—were still externally conditioned by an Other, because man before Christ was not yet a proper "self," not yet a fully independent and free personality. In all decisive life questions, the Greeks and Romans consulted oracles and omens rather than their own conscience, because spirit at this historical stage had not yet been liberated to itself.

Its definitive liberation occurs only with the breaking of Christianity into the pagan world, because only in Christ does the divine essence become one with the spirit appearing in man. Only the Christian God is truly spirit and simultaneously man; spiritual substance now becomes subject in a single world-historical human being. This unity of divine and human nature, through which man becomes the image of God, is from then on, according to Hegel, "the pivot of the world". "Up to here and from here on history goes". European chronology, before and after Christ, thus has for Hegel no merely time-bound meaning, but an absolute-historical sense. In that the world becomes Christian once and for all, man becomes from that point forward an absolutely free subject deciding out of himself, and it contradicts the principle of the Christian world that there should still be slaves within it.

The adoption and spread of faith in Christ necessarily carries political consequences as well. The Greek state was indeed already a state of (democratic) freedom, but only a "freedom of fortune and genius". Only in Christianity does the principle of absolute (monarchical) freedom emerge, wherein man knows himself as identical with the power to which he relates. In it, the spirit wins the freedom toward an unconditional "I will".

Until the full unfolding of this "infinite power of free resolve," however, a long history is required in which Christianity comes to its full development. It reaches from the adoption of the Christian faith by the Germanic peoples through the rule

of the Roman Catholic Church in the Middle Ages to the Protestant Reformation, which reconciles Church and State, conscience and law. Only the Reformation fully establishes that man is determined through himself to be free. The new world-historical peoples develop this principle of spiritual freedom in terrible religious and secular struggles. As a consequence of the Reformation, Hegel also understands the Enlightenment movement of the 18th century and, ultimately, the French Revolution he himself witnessed. The liberation of conscience from papal authority created the prerequisite for the human will to decide, according to its own judgment, to construct a rational state whose principle is the politically conditioned idea of freedom and equality.

The so-called secularization of Christianity thus signifies for Hegel by no means a lapse from its original meaning, but on the contrary its positive realization. While for Luther the content of Christian faith was still externally given through revelation, the European spirit through Rousseau in the French Revolution stood entirely on its own and gave itself the content of its willing. In this final stage of European intellectual history, the "pure free will" brings itself forth, willing itself simply because it wills to. Hegel states: "Not since the sun had stood in the firmament and the planets revolved around it had it been seen that man places himself on his head—that is, on thought—and builds reality according to it". With this European event, Hegel concludes his philosophy of history, whose principle is the "progress in the consciousness of freedom".

By "spirit" and "freedom," however, Hegel means a Christian *logos* and a Christian-Lutheran freedom. For the Greco-Roman world is "sublated" (*aufgehoben*) in the Christian-Germanic world. Out of these two worlds together consists the spiritual unity of the secular world. The spiritual unity of Europe is thus no simple, lifeless unity, but a living, mediated unity of opposites—of Antiquity and Christianity—which engage and contend with one another throughout history. And so the universal fundamental concept of Hegelian philosophy, "spirit," is historically determined in a dual manner: it is first Greek *logos* and then, raised to a higher power, Christian *logos*.

When one has clarified the basic features of Hegel's philosophy of history in this way, the question remains: How does Hegel arrive at his principle of progress in the consciousness of freedom, by means of which he constructs the total occurrence of

the world toward an end that is an end in the sense of fulfillment? The reason for this is itself historical in nature; for it is exclusively the absolute significance that Hegel attributes to the appearance of Christ which allows him to see, in the beginning of the Christian world, the end as the fulfillment of all future times. But because Hegel shifts the Christian conception of the end of time into the occurrence of world history, he is forced to view its accidentally last event as the end and fulfillment of the beginning.

As paradoxical as it sounds, the history of the "Concept" (not empirical events, which continue endlessly without principle) is for Hegel indeed concluded with his own time and philosophy, because the latter recollects the spiritual essence of all history and grasps Christ as the fulfiller of time. Hegel consciously philosophizes in the "old age of the spirit" and knows himself to be a second Proclus. Just like this philosopher of late antiquity, who philosophically completed the entire pagan world prior to its downfall, Hegel is conscious of having organized and concluded the world of the Christian *logos*.

What follows, however, from this affinity with Proclus, in whose philosophy the crisis of the pagan world reveals itself? Plainly this: that Hegel's philosophy is a critical turning point in the history of a Christianity grown old. The step beyond Christianity was no longer dared by Hegel, but by his successors—above all Feuerbach and Marx, and on the other hand Kierkegaard through his struggle against all existing Christendom. In place of Hegel's absolute philosophy of a principled reconciliation, there now step mere time-bound attempts at a decision; men wish to separate once more what Hegel united. In Marx's critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* and in Kierkegaard's polemic against Hegel's *Philosophy of Religion*, despite opposing intentions, there reigns the same pathos of decision against Hegel's union with the earthly reality of the State and the divine reality of Christianity. Kierkegaard wanted, while abandoning all world-historically developed Christendom, to renew Christianity in the form it had prior to its worldly expansion; Marx, conversely, wanted to let all previous history count merely as "prehistory" prior to a future world revolution that would replace transcendental equality before God with earthly communism.

This desire to decide presupposes that Hegel's synthesis of the Christian and pagan worlds was no longer credible. But Hegel himself felt shortly before his death that

his completion of European philosophy was the beginning of an end. The July Revolution of 1830 filled him with disgust and dread, foreboding new divisions to which his theoretical optimism was no longer equal. Occasionally he stated that the principle of spiritual freedom discovered in Europe might emigrate from its homeland. America, he suggested, was now the land of the future and of longing for all those bored by the "historical armory of old Europe". And in a letter he writes that Europe has become a kind of cage in which only two types of people move freely: those who hold the key to the cage themselves, and those who have picked out a spot in the cage where they have neither to act nor to react. Under these circumstances, he noted, it would be more advantageous to remain a private individual. To this European cage Hegel contrasts Russia's future; for Russia, unlike the European states that already have their peak behind them, still carries immense possibilities within itself.

Simultaneously with Hegel and his pupils (who, besides Feuerbach, Marx, and Kierkegaard, include M. Stirner and B. Bauer), clear-sighted individuals in other European countries suffered under the consciousness that Europe's spiritual substance was living itself out to its end (Tocqueville, Cavour, Donoso Cortés). They all foresaw, in the wake of the massification and mechanization of life, a leveling of European existence before whose flattening power the proper culture of Europe retains only a decorative significance. And the cultural-critical writings of recent decades by Simmel and Rathenau, Scheler and Spengler, and most recently Jaspers—prompted by the tradition-destroying power of the World War and the post-war era—by no means produce anything genuinely new; rather, they are merely a final variation on what had been the concern of all educated people across Europe, and especially in Germany, for a hundred years.

Yet despite the contempt into which it fell when positivism achieved dominance in the mid-19th century, Hegel's philosophy exerted a subsequent influence of the greatest significance: out of it arose the so-called Historical School, stretching from Ranke to Dilthey. It preserves the historical sense from Hegel's philosophy, but while abandoning his principle, so that Hegel's philosophy of history turns into a directionless historism.

The most comprehensive and penetrating analysis of the historical problem of Europe in the second half of the 19th century was provided by F. Nietzsche, who

spoke of "European nihilism". Amid the external display of power of Bismarck's Empire fifty years ago, Nietzsche lived through and thought through the problem that Europe had become to itself in a manner whose timeliness cannot be rated highly enough. Nietzsche knew himself as a "premature birth of the coming century" and simultaneously as the heir to all that had been—a new beginning and an end. To this historical tension between origin and future his work owes its expanse and its fundamental ambiguity.

In contrast to Kierkegaard, however, Nietzsche did not seek the way out of European nihilism in a restoration of Christianity, but in a return to the Greek world. While for Kierkegaard nihilism was grounded in the apostasy from Christianity, Nietzsche was convinced that it had its very origin in Christianity. For Christianity, through its devaluation of the natural world of antiquity, caused nothing positive to remain once Christian faith was lost. The decline of Christian faith is simultaneously the advent of nihilism, which lay within Christianity itself.

Nietzsche addresses this in the preface to *The Will to Power*, where he relates the history of nihilism and writes that Europe is like a river that wants to reach its end restlessly and precipitously, no longer reflecting. He, Nietzsche, had done nothing other than reflect and look back upon history to see what must come—as the first perfect nihilist of Europe, who, however, has lived nihilism through to its end within himself and already has it behind him. Nietzsche brought nihilism behind himself by turning it into its opposite: into a radical affirmation of earthly being.

Nietzsche attempted to ground this "Yes" to the totality of being with the Greek doctrine of the eternal recurrence of the same, placing himself in extreme opposition to the Christian doctrine of the unique creation of being out of nothing. If man could will in every moment that everything, just as it is, recur eternally the same, then a supreme affirmation of existence would be achieved, for which pleasure and pain, life and death, are equal in value. Nietzsche's symbols for this highest stance toward being are Zarathustra and Dionysus.

To achieve this "Yes," however, requires the revaluation of all existing Christian-moral values. "Revaluation of all values," he writes in *Ecce Homo*, "that is my formula for an act of supreme self-reflection on the part of humanity... My lot wills that I must know myself in opposition to the mendacity of millennia [meaning Christianity]... I contradict as has never been contradicted before, and am

nevertheless the opposite of a No-saying spirit... Only starting from me are there hopes again".

This hope is directed toward the rebirth of Antiquity. Nietzsche wants to shatter the history of Europe summarized by Hegel literally into "two halves" and be an "explosive" between Antiquity and Christianity, with his "attack" on two millennia of "un-nature," as he calls Christian-European culture. Simultaneously with this intended destruction of historical continuity, there occurs in Nietzsche a fundamental abandonment of European humanity, which up to that point had been a Christian one. For if the God of whom man was an image has been overcome, then a new determination and "overcoming" of man is required. The name Nietzsche gave to his new image of man is Zarathustra, an "*Übermensch*," by which Nietzsche understands the overcomer of God and of Nothingness. For the breeding of such *Übermenschen*, Nietzsche conceived a ruling caste endowed with physical capacities, which commands the mass of herd-men what they are to do. In this, however, the Christian idea of the "salvation of the soul" and the "equality of men" is abolished. In contrast to Kierkegaard, who against Hegel's mediation of the pagan and Christian worlds brought back out the anti-pagan meaning of Christianity, Nietzsche made the reverse attempt: to bring back into force, beyond good and evil, the Greek distinction between noble and base, free men and slaves.

The two seemingly opposite, but in truth interconnected effects that have emanated from Nietzsche in recent times can be designated as historical futurism and active nihilism. Namely, if nothing that formed the substance of the past retains validity, it is only a consequence of this anti-historical mood that it can flip into an anticipation of the future through which one seeks to break free from the past. Such an anticipation of the future can be negative or positive. It can, as in Spengler, sketch a historical-philosophical image of the future whose principle is decline; but it can just as well, as in A. Rosenberg, turn nihilism positively and draft a "myth" of the future, according to which the history of Europe or of the "Germanic" peoples only begins now, in the Third Reich.

More serious than these widely read but journalistic constructions are the ideas of E. Jünger, which are still little known abroad. In his book *The Worker* (*Der Arbeiter*), he attempts to combine Nietzsche's radical critique of the Christian world with Marx's no less radical critique of the bourgeois world, drawing worldview

consequences from the mechanization of the work process under the impression of the World War. The anti-humanistic and anti-European way Jünger thinks about the future of Europe makes him an extreme outpost in modern humanity's struggle with its own tradition—a struggle that actually began with Rousseau.

At this extreme point of the consequences stemming from Nietzsche, it is good to recall a historian who, between Hegel and Nietzsche, is the only one who—while possessing a completely clear knowledge of the problematic condition of European culture—upheld its idea as a binding heritage: Jacob Burckhardt (1813–1897), a student of Ranke, an opponent yet successor of Hegel, a contemporary of Marx (1818–1883), and a colleague of Nietzsche. Burckhardt stretches like a living bridge from the time when Hegel and Goethe still dominated German culture, across Hegel's radical successors (whose contemporary he was), down to Nietzsche and Dilthey. His writings contain the sum of a mature experience of Europe's historical nature. Despite their opposition to Hegel's principle of progress, they confirm his end-historical conception; for the ultimate motive of Burckhardt's reflection on European history was the realization that it was becoming fundamentally different from what it had been.

Through this recollection of "Old Europe," he wanted to gain a historical standard for understanding the present. In contrast to all those "in a hurry" (*Pressierenden*), for whom progress in the movement of time did not move forward fast enough, he counted himself among the "retarding ones" (*Retardierenden*), who amid upheaval and crises preserve historical continuity and remember instead of forgetting.

Burckhardt saw the direction in which the European spirit had been driving since the French Revolution determined as follows: European unity, which had its foundation in the Greek-educated Roman Empire and then its center in the Roman Catholic Church, is decaying increasingly into centralized national power-states whose legal foundations no longer possess religious sanction. What stood firm for millennia enters into flux and becomes provisional ever since majorities stepped into the place of old authorities. The emancipated masses of the people have sought since the French Revolution to seize control of the state, which in turn is forced into social experiments. But precisely because everything hitherto established totters and becomes open to debate, the state must now strive for a total unity and availability of all forces, expanding its profane law all the more as the old sacred law

disappears from human feeling. The consciousness of unified nationality is generated in such a way that in decisive moments it outweighs both social questions and European cultural unity, because a true European *ecumene* no longer exists.

Culture, since the spread of universal suffrage and general education, becomes increasingly vulgar because it becomes more general. Everything is sacrificed to modern civilization and its leveling force: property and social rank, refined manners, art, and higher education, because majorities press down upon everything and lower the standard. What Burckhardt saw ahead was a civilized barbarism and, politically, a ruthless tyranny. For since 1840 (the beginning of industrialization and social-radical movements), the world had been driving toward the alternative between "complete democracy" and "absolute, lawless despotism". What lay ahead for Europe was a kind of Roman imperial era accompanied by great wars among nations. The two jaws of the vise between which culture would then find itself were, from below, the Fourth Estate (the proletariat) and, from above, militarism. "Terrible simplifiers" (*Schreckliche Vereinfacher*) would descend upon old Europe and uniformize all of life according to a military pattern.

These anxieties of Burckhardt concerned not only what he felt to be the substance of his own existence, but simultaneously the spiritual existence of Europe. For what he foresaw—the "leveling compulsory unity"—was in his eyes an attack on spirit per se, which distinguishes European culture as the home of all opposites and the richest formations. For European (and in this respect Burckhardt still thinks exactly like Hegel) is "the expression of all forces in monument, image, word, institution, and party down to the individual—the living through of the spiritual in all sides and directions; the striving of the spirit to leave a record of everything within it, not surrendering silently to world-monarchies and theocracies like the ancient Orient". And therefore only one thing is fatal for Europe: crushing power, "whether it emanates from a conquering barbarian people or from accumulated domestic power-means in the service of a state or a leveling tendency, be it political, religious, or social".

Because Burckhardt saw the European future in such perspectives and recognized in the French Revolution an event by which Europe pulled the "historical ground" from under its own feet, historical consciousness gained for him the significance of a counterweight to the current of events that has carried us along since 1780 toward

parts unknown. The World War lying behind us, the fall of centuries-old authorities, social upheavals, and finally the establishment of new dictatorial state powers have proven Burckhardt's foresight right in more than one respect.

Despite his gloomy outlook, however, he did not lightmindedly prophesy a collapse, but contented himself with asserting, amid the constant flux of world events, the suffering and acting human being as the abiding center of all history. His archetype of the suffering human being was the "long-suffering Odysseus," the representative of Greek humanity as it stands at the beginning of Europe. Yet Burckhardt's preference for the Greek world did not carry the polemical sense it had in Nietzsche, whose evaluation always came at the expense of Christianity. Burckhardt knew that the spirit of antiquity is no longer ours, and that the modern pursuit of gain and power pushes toward an interpretation of life independent of Christianity.

He was, like the sages of late antiquity, a cheerful pessimist who contented himself with leisure, health, and freedom. This freedom pertained above all to independence from participation in a corrupted public sphere, from merely distracting social intercourse, from unnecessary needs, and from public opinions behind which stands no proper view of the world, no experience of real life, and no true convictions. Yet precisely through this abstention from his time, Burckhardt is far more relevant than those European intellectuals who now surrender the freedom of the spirit *en masse* because they can no longer master its dangers, submitting to communism, state fanaticism, or the Church as a substitute for a culture that has lost its footing.

In contrast to these "miseducated" individuals (*Verbildeten*), who desperately want to believe something at any price to relieve themselves of the freedom of their own thought, Burckhardt demonstrated in his own person what Nietzsche once remarked: namely, that "all wiser people in Europe now are skeptics"—that is, human beings who have no need to lean upon any dogma, whether religious, social, or political.